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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000175

SIPDIS

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PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/20/2017

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SUBJECT: RECENT SPIKE IN DISSIDENT ARRESTS; TRIALS UPDATE

REF: A. DAMASCUS 0042

1B. DAMASCUS 0112

Classified By: A/DCM William Roebuck, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

11. (U) Summary. On February 17, Kurdish student activist Kamal Sheikho was detained by the Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI). Sheikho's arrest followed the SARG's detention of two other prominent opposition figures, Mahmoud Sarem and Razak Eid. Then, after months of trial postponements Anwar al-Bunni was formerly charged by the Criminal Court on a felony charge of "weakening the nation." The joint trial of Michel Kilo and Mahmoud Issa also continued with a brief session but was quickly postponed.
End Summary.

12. (C) Kurdish student activist and university student Kamal Sheikho was summoned by the SMI on the morning of February 17 and has not been heard from since. Sheikho's current whereabouts are still unknown, according to numerous Embassy contacts. Ammar Qurabi of the National Organization for Human Rights (NOHR) told poloff that he had heard an unconfirmed rumor that Sheikho's arrest was connected to MEPI money he received through the Brookings Institute and Washington-based Syrian opposition figure Ammar Abu Hamid, who runs the pro-democracy website, ikhtilaf al-thawra. The NOHR representative said he could not confirm the rumor, however.

13. (C) Prior to the incommunicado detention of Sheikho, Syrian Human Rights Organization (SHRO) reported that poet and opposition figure, Mahmoud Sarem, was arrested February 17. Five days later Sarem was referred to military prosecutors who decided to transfer him to Adra, a prison where he will await formal charges, according to SHRO and other embassy sources. (Note: Sarem was last arrested in September 2005 for publicly criticizing the president and the government. Sarem was held for almost a year before being released on bail on September 19, 2006. End Note.) Shortly after Sarem's recent re-arrest, Razak Eid, a prominent Syrian intellectual and writer, was arrested on February 8 and held for 13 hours before being released, according to multiple Syrian human rights groups. In addition, the regime reportedly imposed a travel ban against Eid which prevents him from traveling to France for prostate surgery.

14. (C) Qurabi and an Austrian Embassy contact told poloff that on February 18, civil society activist and prominent human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, during his fifth appearance in front of the Criminal Court in Damascus, was formally charged with "publishing false news that would

weaken the national morale," a charge that carries a minimum sentence of three years. All other charges stemming from his arrest in mid-May were vacated as a result of the end-of-year Presidential amnesty (ref A). Austrian Emboff said that Bunni appeared tired and weak and that he was made to stand with the rest of the common criminals behind the bars of a cell along one side of the courtroom. (Note: In the previous two court appearances, Bunni was brought in separately from the rest of the common criminals and was allowed to stand outside the courtroom cell. End Note.) In addition, a representative from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor read a statement that requested the presiding judge refer the case to the Ministry of the Interior after the completion of any sentence so that Bunni would have his nationality stripped, according to Embassy sources. (Note: The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor failed to send a representative to the previous three court dates thereby causing the trial to be postponed each time. End Note.) The Judge reportedly rejected this request. The trial is set to resume on March ¶11.

¶15. (C) In addition, NOHR contacts reported that on February 19, Damascus-Beirut Declaration signees Michel Kilo and Mahmoud Issa also made their fifth appearance before the Damascus criminal court. (Note: The Damascus-Beirut Declaration is a statement that was signed by many pro-reform Syrian activists and members of the March 14 movement in Lebanon. The Declaration envisions better relations between the two countries. End Note.) As was the case in their previous court appearance (ref B), the proceedings began before most foreign diplomats and other prominent Syrian dissidents could arrive. The presiding judge once again postponed the trial because co-defendants Suleiman Shummar and Khalil Hussein, who are still at large, failed to appear,

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according to NOHR. The trial is scheduled to resume on March ¶5.

¶16. (C) Comment:
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